

WEATHER

Future of Iconic Coastal Road in Doubt Following January Storms

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A portion of West Cliff Drive fell into the Pacific Ocean after a series of powerful storms of rain and high winds hit California's Central Coast in Santa Cruz on Jan. 8, 2023. | Melina Mara/The Washington Post via Getty Images

After a massive winter storm left Santa Cruz's iconic West Cliff Drive in pieces, its future looks uncertain—and some experts say efforts to fully restore the road are futile in the face of climate change.

West Cliff Drive, a popular tourist destination and a main residential street along Santa Cruz's coastline, has been the subject of concerns about sea level rise for years. In the aftermath of enormous waves and high winds that took out entire chunks of the roughly 3-mile road in January, the city hurried to clean and reopen it to one-lane traffic where the most damage occurred.

But longer-term plans—which may include new curved sea walls and other reinforcements—are still in the works, and have yet to be signed off by the state body that oversees coastal projects.

“The storm has reminded us that we can't just keep putting Band-Aids on things,” said Gary Griggs, a UC Santa Cruz researcher who specializes in climate and coastal science.

“We need to think longer term, and realistically, there's nothing we can do over the long term to hold back the Pacific Ocean. It's coming, and it's coming for us.”

While the January storms may have hastened the damage, climate experts say to expect more of these once-rare weather events. And figuring out how to plan for them, and the rising seas in general, is not a problem unique to Santa Cruz or even California. Coastal cities up and down the state have been grappling with similar challenges, debating the idea of “managed retreat,” which focuses on relocating property and infrastructure and planning for sea level rise instead of fighting it.

The vulnerability of West Cliff Drive in particular has been clear to the city of Santa Cruz for years.

Santa Cruz's Public Works Department even published a 258-page West Cliff Drive Adaptation and Management Plan that lays out a laundry list of studies and projects to take on over the next decade, including a combination of transit, vegetation and facilities improvements, curved sea walls and fixing old "riprap," or the large boulder armoring that's been protecting the cliffs. In a video on its website, the city says it lost 4,000 tons of riprap during the January storms.

"Pretty much all the places we identified [as hazards], there are problems now," said David Revell, a coastal geomorphologist who consulted on the city's plan.

Griggs and Revell, along with a community group called Save West Cliff, say it may be time for a reality check.

To Revell, the city's current plan places too much emphasis on maintaining the status quo by repairing the existing riprap and other armoring—something the California Coastal Commission, the body that would have to approve that or any other coastal project, tends not to like in favor of longer-term solutions.

He and Griggs imagine an alternative that more closely resembles the changes made to East Cliff Drive, where the city stabilized the bluffs and transitioned to a one-lane road—although West Cliff's solution may have to be more complex.

"I think in the long run it's going to be a yard-by-yard or foot-by-foot decision based on exactly which areas are the most vulnerable," Griggs said.

While consulting on the plan, Revell said his group found that prioritizing recreation—particularly access to the city’s world-class surfing—would have the most economic benefit to the city and community, especially compared to the expensive status quo of constant emergency repairs.

“If we keep armoring, we’re going to lose those surf spots much faster than if we allow erosion to continue or look at ways to add more sand to the beaches,” Revell said. “I think dodging cars is probably not the long-term answer.”

But ultimately, Griggs said, there’s no stopping the inevitable.

“All protection ends somewhere,” Griggs said. “You can’t build a wall to hold back 10 feet of sea level rise.”

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